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ABSTRACT

Someone who has a learning disability has difficulty in perceiving, understanding, and using information from the environment. This disability can cause problems in reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, or performing mathematics. Furthermore, learning disabilities may affect motor functioning, memory, and attention. Because a growing number of youths have been identified as having learning disabilities, it is expected that the vocational impact of learning disabilities will receive greater attention as these youth leave school and enter the work force. Most of these youths will have been provided an array of services and accommodations in their secondary programs and many will need continued accommodation in the workplace. Human resource managers can play a vital role in assisting persons with learning disabilities to be successful in employment by: (1) being sensitive to the needs of persons with this hidden handicap; (2) providing an environment in which fear of discrimination will not prevent the employee from disclosing his or her disability; (3) identifying the essential functions of jobs in the workplace so that accommodations may be considered which would allow the employee to be productive on the job; and (4) including the employer in the selection of appropriate accommodations. (ABL)

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ACCOMMODATING WORKERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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ACCOMMODATING WORKERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

The need for accommodating workers with disabilities has received increasing attention in the business literature for a number of reasons. For example, employers are faced with a potential labor shortage due to the aging of the baby boom population along with a decrease in the United States population. As a result of this shrinking labor pool, employers have begun to seriously consider hiring workers from groups which have previously been underutilized in the labor force, including persons with disabilities. Also, renewed legislative attention toward the employment needs of persons with disabilities has underscored the need to improve participation of persons with disabilities in the labor force.

When human resource managers think about hiring someone who has a disability, they probably visualize a person who has an obvious physical or mental impairment. This perception of disability has often been promoted in the business literature in articles discussing hiring "the handicapped." Furthermore, groups promoting the employment of persons with disabilities by featuring persons with obvious physical impairments, particularly persons in wheelchairs, have also contributed to the common perception of persons with disabilities as having readily discernible handicaps.

While the accommodation needs of persons with obvious impairments may be great, one group that has received little attention in the human resources literature is persons who have learning disabilities. Because

members of this population have "hidden handicaps," the need to provide accommodation for them in the workplace may often be overlooked. An understanding of what is meant by the term learning disabled and an awareness of characteristics associated with learning disabilities could help human resource managers better accommodate workers with learning disabilities in the workplace.

What Is A Learning Disability?

Someone who has a learning disability has difficulty in perceiving, understanding, and using information from the environment. This disability can cause problems in reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, or performing mathematics. Furthermore, learning disabilities may affect motor functioning, memory, and attention. In some instances, a learning disability can be attributed to a particular neurological deficit, such as brain injury or minimal brain dysfunction. In the majority of cases, no direct cause of the learning disability can be established and it is assumed that the learning disability is the result of underlying neurological deficits.

Some key concepts in defining who has a learning disability are as follows: (a) the learning problem cannot be attributed to physical or sensory impairments, such as hearing loss or visual impairment; (b) the learning problem cannot be attributed to poor academic preparation or mental retardation; and (c) the learning problem cannot be the result of social or cultural disadvantagement. Learning disabilities must be

diagnosed by a psychologist skilled in the identification of this disability.[1]

It is estimated that between 5% and 10% of the United States population is affected by learning disabilities.[2] Youth with learning disabilities represent the largest special needs group served in school systems. As these youth enter the work force, many will need accommodation to assist them in being fully productive in their jobs.

Characteristics of Persons with Learning Disabilities

Persons with learning disabilities represent a heterogenous group with a wide range of strengths and limitations; with vocational potential ranging from unskilled labor to jobs requiring advanced college degrees. Although the degree to which a learning disability will create a need for accommodation in the workplace depends on the severity of the impairment (as with any other disability), a number of characteristics of persons with learning disabilities have been identified which, if present, might require accommodation.

Providing accommodation in the workplace for persons with learning disabilities begins with determining whether the person is able to perform the job with accommodation. Job analysis will provide the employer with information about the essential functions of a job and will provide a basis for determining how a job might be altered to accommodate the worker who has a learning disability. Some

characteristics of persons with learning disabilities and accompanying accommodations are described in Figure 1.[3]

Insert Figure 1 about here

In most instances, accommodation for workers who have learning disabilities involves altering how instructions are given, job restructuring, or minor work site modifications. Open communication with the person who has a learning disability is critical in determining what types of accommodations may be needed.

Summary

Because of the growing number of youth who have been identified as having learning disabilities, it is expected that the vocational impact of learning disabilities will receive greater attention as these youth leave school and enter the work force. Most of these youth will have been provided an array of services and accommodations in their secondary programs and many will need continued accommodation in the workplace.

Human resource managers can play a vital role in assisting persons with learning disabilities to be successful in employment by (1) being sensitive to the needs of persons with this hidden handicap, (2) providing an environment in which fear of discrimination will not prevent the employee from disclosing his or her disability, (3)

identifying the essential functions of jobs in the workplace so that accommodations may be considered which would allow the employee to be productive in the job, and (4) including the employee in the selection of appropriate accommodations.

Footnotes

1. U.S. Office of Education. Implementation of part B of the Education of the Handicapped Act. Federal Register. 1977, pp. 42474-42518.

2. Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities. Learning Disabilities: A Report to Congress. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987.

3. See We Learn Differently . . .But We Learn and Work. Alabama Department of Education, Division of Rehabilitation and Crippled Children Services, 1987, and Zerlein, R.A., Smith, M., and Diffley, J., Vocational Rehabilitation for Learning Disabled Adults. Albertson, NY: Human Resources Center, 1984.

Figure 1
Characteristics and Accommodations

Requires concrete demonstrations	Provide "hands on" demonstrations
Has time management difficulties	Provide a pocket calendar
Has difficulty following written instructions	Use oral instructions/ Read instructions
Has difficulty with changes in work routine	Place in repetitive environment
Has difficulty remembering sequences in a task	Provide a check-list of task sequence
Appears clumsy or poorly coordinated	Avoid tasks with such activity
Interrupts inappropriately	Allow to work in isolation
Misinterprets social cues	Use concrete; simple language
Is withdrawn	Provide work in a small group
Has short attention span	Provide work in isolation
Has difficulty writing legibly	Provide a typewriter or allow for oral reporting
Works quickly, but makes frequent errors	Provide frequent performance checks